

BLIND

BY HARRY BEST

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BLIND. No practical and uniform definition of blindness has been worked out. Several ready to hand definitions have been devised, such as inability to designate form or color, to count upon the hand at a distance of twelve inches, to read writing or print in large characters or to recognize the human face. What is sometimes known as "industrial blindness" is commonly defined as insufficient sight even with the aid of eyeglasses for the execution of economic tasks. More precise definitions based upon medical examination refer to the proportion of visual perception still retained, frequently the possession of not more than one tenth of normal vision in the better eye.

The blind population of the entire world has been roughly estimated as from 3,000,000 to 5,000,000. In the United States the census bureau reported 52,567 blind persons for the year 1920, and computed the total blind population as 74,500. The estimates of special commissions for the blind, which have been created in certain states, have usually been about one third higher than those of the census bureau.

Blindness is more common among males than among females; the ratio in the United States is 134.6 males to 100 females. This excess of males is in some part due to their greater exposure to industrial accidents and to their greater liability to venereal disease. Blindness is found to a larger extent among colored races than among the white, probably in large part because of lack of proper medical care. It occurs in ever increasing measure with the advance of old age. Nearly one half of the blind population in America is over sixty, while only 7.5 percent of the general population are above that age. Under five years of age there are 32 blind persons per 1,000,000; at eighty-five or over there are 15,858.

The causes of blindness and therefore the degree of preventability vary greatly in different sections of the world. Two of the greatest causes of blindness are becoming more negligible every year in civilized countries where proper preventive methods have been introduced. These are *ophthalmia neonatorum*, commonly caused by venereal infection at birth, and trachoma, a highly infectious inflammation of the conjunctiva, partially curable by treatment or operative measures and preventable through isolation of centers of infection. Both are diseases which flourish under unsanitary conditions and lack of skilled medical care. *Ophthalmia neonatorum* is commonest in countries such as India where

midwifery is practised with little medical supervision and much superstition. In most civilized countries today the use of preventive measures at the birth of every child, whether or not venereal infection be suspected, is required by law and the rate of blindness from this cause is thereby cut down tremendously. Trachoma has been an epidemic disease of military and civil life since 1798, when Bonaparte and his army invaded Egypt and brought it back with them. So far as it is traceable the disease seems to have originated in Egypt and it is still rife there as well as in southeastern Europe, Arabia, China, Russia and Poland. Trachoma was one of the more important causes of blindness in the United States until 1907, when the new immigration act excluded aliens affected with the disease. Trachoma is now found mainly in certain restricted areas of the country, including localities in which Indians live.

From the returns of the 1920 census it appears that nearly three fourths of the blindness in the United States is attributable to disease; the rest is due to external causes including accidents (alone responsible for about one sixth), poisoning, foreign substances in the eye and malformations. Of the blindness caused by disease over two thirds is chargeable to some specific affection of the eye and a little under one third to some disease of more general character. Among specific diseases of the eye cataract is most prevalent; this disease alone causes about one seventh of all blindness. Less important are glaucoma, atrophy of the optic nerve, *ophthalmia neonatorum*, trachoma, retinal disorders, various corneal disorders (especially corneal ulcer) and other affections including progressive myopia. The leading general diseases causing blindness are measles, meningitis and scarlet fever. Venereal disease plays an important part in the loss of vision; directly and indirectly it is probably responsible for not less than one sixth of all blindness in the United States.

A large part of the blindness due to special ocular disorder is within medical control. As indicated above, *ophthalmia neonatorum* and trachoma are without much difficulty almost entirely preventable. Cataract, glaucoma of an acute nature and not a few other affections of the eye might be greatly reduced in extent.

Blindness from such general diseases as measles, meningitis and scarlet fever is now rapidly decreasing and might be almost entirely suppressed. Progress in the control of communicable diseases will indirectly result in the

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decrease of cases of blindness attributable to them. In individual cases blindness resulting from a general disease can often be prevented by early recognition and skilled treatment. As general health conditions, sanitary measures and living standards are improved and with the widespread establishment of eye clinics there will be less occasion for blindness from these causes.

Blindness due to external causes is also in large measure preventable. Blindness from accidents is fundamentally due to neglect or carelessness on the part of the individual and to conditions of modern industry. In industrial establishments the eye may be struck by various substances, especially particles of flying metal; or the sight may be impaired or destroyed by intense light or by contact with heated or noxious chemical substances. Blindness from such causes can be eliminated to a large extent by appropriate safety regulations such as good lighting arrangements, proper exhaust systems for the removal of gases and dusts, hoods or shields for certain operations and the use of goggles wherever necessary. Conditions for the protection of the eye in industry are steadily improving. Legislation requiring the adoption of general safety measures is increasing, although as yet there is but little specific mention of the eye. Workmen's compensation laws, now almost general in the United States, provide another impetus to the movement for the installation of safety devices.

Hereditary blindness, although small in proportion, cannot be controlled since its manner of operation is as yet but little known. The factor of heredity is responsible for most of the non-preventable cases of blindness, which in the United States constitute one fourth of the total. Blindness of hereditary character is found to move through certain diseases, especially cataract, *retinitis pigmentosa*, detachment of the retina, progressive myopia, etc. The hereditary influence is illustrated by the ratios derived from the 1920 census report: 4.2 percent of the blind have one or both parents blind, 9.7 percent blind brothers or sisters and 1.7 percent blind children.

Blindness has always been looked upon as one of the heaviest of human afflictions. In earliest times the blind were treated with but a limited degree of consideration, now and then suffering direct abuse but more often only regarded as hindrances to the able bodied. Often blindness was deemed a divine visitation

or punishment for the misdeeds of those stricken or of their forefathers. In later times, particularly with the advent of Christianity, the blind became objects of pity and were encouraged to beg; they became one of the traditional subjects for bestowal of alms by the benevolently inclined. In the Middle Ages shelter and some degree of care were given the blind by the monks in hospices. In the following centuries we find sporadic instances of corporations for the care of the blind and attempts at educating individual blind persons. In spite of this the general attitude of indifference persisted well into the modern period, and not until the last half of the eighteenth century is there any evidence of a sense of social obligation toward the blind.

Even in the twentieth century the blind suffer grievously from misconceptions of their behavior and abilities on the part of a general public which, paradoxically enough, is well disposed toward them. Too often the blind are regarded as little more than beggars, frequently with a special privilege to solicit alms on the assumption that they can do nothing else. Such treatment has a doubly injurious effect: it licenses and encourages the blind person to play upon his infirmity, and it confirms in the public mind a sense of the utter dependence of this class. Another source of trouble is the inability of the public to recognize the vast differences between individual blind persons. The law, reflecting uninformed public opinion, is even slower to recognize the actual needs of the blind. It is not based on a scientific, well rounded conception of the relation of the blind to society at large, although in certain states in America recent legislation in this field shows distinct improvement.

The earliest intelligent attempts to improve the conditions of life for the blind are found in the field of instruction for blind children. The first school for the blind was established by Valentin Haüy in France late in the eighteenth century and its success eventually aroused a great deal of public interest. In the United States the first school for the blind, the Perkins Institute, was established by Samuel Gridley Howe in Boston in 1829; it had some financial public support from the outset. Shortly afterward institutions were founded in New York and Philadelphia. The schools established subsequently throughout the United States achieved from the outset an amount of public support which is significant in differentiating them from

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those which had grown up abroad. Those first established in the United States have for the most part remained private undertakings, in the hands of special bodies created for the purpose but with regular state assistance; the later schools have been strictly state institutions. Less than a dozen states are now without special institutions, either private with state support or entirely state supported. In a few states blind and deaf children are educated in the same institution, a policy on the whole undesirable but sometimes excused because of the small number of pupils. In an increasing number of American cities special classes for blind children are being established. There are also what are known as sight saving classes for the partially blind; in some cases these special classes operate under state laws with the aid of state funds. In certain states scholarships are provided for the blind at regular colleges, and the idea of a special college for the blind has been raised but has been generally abandoned. In a few states there are homes for very young or pre-school blind children, combining the features of a kindergarten, nursery and hospital.

The first real mitigation in the condition of the blind came with the invention of raised print by Valentin Haüy, Paris, 1784. Since then a number of different systems of printing for the blind have been evolved, but their usefulness has been impaired by lack of uniformity. A uniform system of raised print known as Revised Braille (*see* BRAILLE) has now been adopted for the United States. Of printing houses for the blind in the United States the chief is the American Printing House at Louisville, which is subsidized by the federal government. There exist also libraries for the blind which in many cases send out books to homes in the neighborhood and sometimes honor requests from the most distant parts of the country. This home use of libraries is greatly facilitated by the free use of the mails accorded to reading matter for the blind. Despite the tremendous value of raised print barely one third of the blind of the United States are able to read any form of it. This is largely due to the occurrence of blindness relatively late in life with consequent lack of enthusiasm for learning the new manner of reading.

Home teaching is a recent development in the attempt to broaden the life of the blind. This covers general intellectual instruction, the use of raised print and instruction in simple handicrafts, especially sewing, the latter being intended to

aid the blind partially to support themselves.

The great outstanding problem of the blind today is still an economic one. Eyesight constitutes such an essential physical faculty in the ordinary course of earning a livelihood that those bereft of it find it most difficult and in many cases impossible to enter the ranks of independent wage earners. The field of employment which is open to the blind is exceedingly circumscribed, and economic independence for them is proportionately difficult. History shows examples of certain occupations to which large numbers of the blind flock by tradition. In Mohammedan countries, for example, the blind become teachers of the Koran, which they first learn by heart. Japan has a league of blind masseurs. Begging in the Orient and Africa is an accepted means of support for the blind. On city streets in America the blind vendor of small and often useless wares is an all too customary sight. Accurate data on the number of blind who work and the amount of their earnings are difficult to obtain and no estimate is therefore attempted except for the United States. Here only about one fourth of the blind males can even nominally be regarded as gainfully employed. Of blind males so classed less than one half earn more than \$400 a year. Of all the adult blind only about one eighth can be regarded as wholly self-supporting. A small proportion of them have independent means. Really considerable incomes are earned only by those who have special talents or who had achieved highly paid positions before the onset of blindness. The unfavorable economic situation of the blind is however not to be attributed to blindness alone, since a very large proportion of the blind are too old for industrial employment in any case. However, there can be little doubt that with fuller investigation of the subject and with more suitable training a considerably larger field of employment can be found.

Of the blind who are gainfully employed in this country three fifths are engaged in broom making, farming, retail dealing, piano tuning, playing and teaching of music, chair caning, and huckstering. A number in general occupations including professional occupations have continued in their callings after the advent of blindness. This is true of many of those reported as engaged in farming who have been able to continue with minor farm tasks such as milking. Numbers in mechanical and manufacturing pursuits are engaged in some simple

handicraft. Among blind women sewing is the most usual occupation.

Of the blind who are not self-supporting the greater part are cared for by their families, friends or relatives. A small proportion, chiefly the aged, are cared for in special homes for the blind. Others are supported by their earnings in special industrial establishments subsidized by private charity. The majority of the remainder are directly dependent wholly or in part upon public or private charitable agencies.

Special industrial establishments have been organized in the hope that the blind could thereby be made self-supporting, but their limitations soon became apparent. They can accommodate only the blind of early or middle age, of temperamental fitness and of proper industrial qualifications—qualities not found among the greater number of the blind. The restricted nature of possible industries, together with the inability of the blind to compete on even terms with those who can see, makes it very difficult for such establishments to attain any considerable measure of self-maintenance. There are possibly fifty special industrial establishments in various parts of the United States, some of which include a boarding or living home as well.

An increasing effort is being made by certain agencies to find employment for blind persons in regular workshops or in some business enterprise of their own. Feasible only for a limited number and requiring efficient supervision this is at best a costly enterprise. The plan has some hopeful features. Although the financial rewards cannot be large, work of a simple character can be done by a few of the blind in factories where the management is sympathetic. By a larger number work can be done in their own homes, especially some form of sewing by women. St. Dunstan's in England, the home and school for the blind veterans of the World War, has achieved some success in training and placing blind soldiers in gainful employment. The patriotic appeal of the blind veteran has removed some of the obstacles to the finding of employment.

In America about half the states have within the last few years developed systems of pensions for the blind. The maximum amount allowed is usually about \$300 a year. The system has in many cases been rather loosely directed. There is great need for a well devised, carefully administered relief system for the blind, although this alone, however well administered, can never afford the kind of solution for the

individual which is always offered by a job.

The one really desirable means of affording financial aid to the blind who cannot support themselves is through some plan of social insurance whereby compensation is granted on the occasion of the loss of sight. In the United States this principle is now embodied only in workmen's compensation acts, which are becoming increasingly comprehensive.

HARRY BEST

See: DEPENDENCY; BEGGING; DEAF; MENTAL DEFECTIVES; COMMUNICABLE DISEASES, CONTROL OF; VENEREAL DISEASES; HEREDITY; IMMIGRATION; ACCIDENTS, INDUSTRIAL; SAFETY MOVEMENT; COMPENSATION AND LIABILITY INSURANCE; VETERANS; REHABILITATION; SOCIAL CASE WORK.

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BLIOKH, IVAN STANISLAVOVICH. *See* BLOCH, JEAN DE.

BLISS, WILLIAM DWIGHT PORTER (1856–1926), American Christian Socialist, clergyman and editor. Bliss came of old New England stock of idealistic traditions. His experience as clergyman brought him into close contact with groups of workers, especially the mill operatives of South Natick, Massachusetts, whose conditions aroused first his sympathy and then his indignation. In order to establish more direct association with working people he joined the Knights of Labor and in 1890 founded

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